New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1955

Volume XVI, Number 24 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of December 12, 1955

1955 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres in Other Years
Original Reviews Appeared In These Volumes

Stage Play	1954 Vol.	*Page*
Anastasia		192
Anniversary Waltz		339
Bad Seed (The)		223
Boy Friend (The)		299
Caine Mutiny Court Martial (The)		382
Dear Charles		316
*Fanny		256
Flowering Peach (The)		196
House of Flowers		189
Lunatics and Lovers		219
Mrs. Patterson		231
*Pajama Game (The)		324
Peter Pan		273
Quadrille		259
Rainmaker (The)		264
Reclining Figure		294
Saint of Bleecker Street (The)		199
Sandhog		239
Tender Trap (The)		282
Wedding Breakfast		243
What Every Woman Knows		208
*Witness for the Prosecution		216
	1953 Vol.	
Can-Can		304
Kismet		198
Solid Gold Cadillac (The)		222
Tea and Sympathy		266
*Teahouse of the August Moon (The)		254
	1952 Vol.	
Seven Year Itch (The)		186
	1951 Vol.	
Fourposter (The)		190

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 12, 1955*

1955 PRODUCTIONS
Premieres During 1955
Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
All in One	325
Almost Crazy	298
Ankles Aweigh	329
Arlequin Poli Par L'Amour	217
Barbier de Seville (Le)	217
Bourgeois Gentilhomme (Le)	230
*Bus Stop	346
Carefree Tree (The)	249
*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof	342
Catch a Star!	290
*Chalk Garden (The)	227
Champagne Complex	334
*Damn Yankees	310
Dark Is Light Enough (The)	357
Day by the Sea (3)	279
Deadfall	224
*Desk Set (The)	234
Desperate Hours (The)	370
*Diary of Anne Frank (The)	257
Doctor's Dilemma (The)	397
Festival	393
Grand Prize (The)	385
*Hatful of Rain (A)	213
Heavenly Twins (The)	220
Henry IV, Part I	282
H.M.S. Pinafore	see 275
Honeys (The)	314
*Inherit the Wind	322
Island of Goats	260
Iolanthe	275
*Janus	201
*Lark (The)	206
Master Builder (The)	349
*Matchmaker (The)	194
Mikado (The)	see 275
*No Time for Sergeants	238
Once Upon a Tailor	305
Othello	285
Phoenix '55	317
*Pipe Dream	198
Pirates of Penzance (The)	see 275
*Plain and Fancy	382
Princess Ida	see 275
*Roomful of Roses (A)	241
Ruddigore	see 275
Seventh Heaven	302
*Silk Stockings	354
Skin of Our Teeth (The)	293
Southwest Corner (The)	374
3 For Tonight	337
*Tiger at the Gates	264
Time of Your Life (The)	390
Tonight in Samarkand	365
Trial by Jury	see 275
*Vamp (The)	210
*View From the Bridge (A)	272
Wayward Saint (The)	362
*Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?	246
Wisteria Trees (The)	377
Wooden Dish (The)	254
Yeomen of the Guard (The)	see 275
Young and Beautiful (The)	267
CRITIC'S CIRCLE AWARD	340

Theatre Openings

"The Matchmaker"

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of December 12, 1955*

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

All Reviews copyrighted by the newspapers and reproduced by permission.

Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"The Matchmaker"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 6, 1955

'Matchmaker' Is Delightful

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Better jump in front of a subway than miss "The Matchmaker."

With Ruth Gordon a brilliant captain of the ship, Thornton Wilder's raffish, good-natured comedy ploughs the waves of laughter at the Royale, with every sail filled.

No contemporary but Wilder has tried to write in the heroic size of Restoration humor. And, certainly, there is nobody alive today who can play it quite as Ruth Gordan can.

Her Best Job.

It is a vast creation she has conceived in this role of Mrs. Levi, an enchanting and practical marriage broker who does her best job on herself.

In the early 80s, she finds, pursues and catches her man with robust and radiant humor unmatchable in the theater.

Miss Gordon knows how to go to extremes of humor without ever being vulgar or heavy-handed. She finds eccentric and illuminating gestures, a wildly dynamic vocal range and inhumanly pliant facial expressions, with which to embroider her comedy.

The play is written so that, in each of its four scenes, she has what amounts to an aria, a key scene which is almost a monologue. The brilliant direction of Tyrone Guthrie and a truly fabulous cast make a joyous frolic of the play that is a spellbinding experience.

Eileen Herlie, who made her British reputation in heavy tragedy, here plays a lilting Irish milliner, fresh and romantic as a May blossom, and utterly winning.

Loring Smith, as the object of the Gordon intentions, is grandly broad and huffy. He can rarely have had such an opportunity to display his matchless pomp.

Right Down the Line.

But the company is excellent right down the line. Esme Church, who does not turn up till the final scene, has all the low comedy haughtiness of Madame Oglepuss. And Philip Leeds as a maniacal accordionist, gets laughs without words.

The play is such a romp that narrating the plot would be as pointless as it would be impossible. Wilder once again establishes intimate contact with his audience by having his characters address the onlookers directly.

Miss Gordon has a fine passage which she relates with sheer genius, about why she means to marry again. And, toward the end, several of the characters explain the play's moral, each in his own way.

Like a Hat.

Miss Herlie would charmingly have it that life is like a hat. You will never find out what it looks like on you in a mirror, but only when you wear it in front of other people. In other words get out and mix up with the world—and live!

The play is filled with joyful invention, and fireworks of great good spirits. It is big and rich and gay and uninhibited, and, with all that, has the added rare virtue of being in perfect taste.

"The Matchmaker" is so unusual and so rigorously uplifting, that to miss it is tantamount to deliberately starving yourself.

"THE MATCHMAKER"

Comedy by Thornton Wilder; staged by Tyrone Guthrie; settings and costumes by Tanya Moiseiwitsch; presented by the Theatre Guild and David Merrick at the Royale Theatre, December 5, 1955. The cast:

Horace Vandergelder..Loring Smith
Ambrose Kemper..Alexander Davion
Joe Scanlon.....Philip Leeds
Gertrude.....Charity Grace
Cornelius Hackl....Arthur Hill
Ermengarde....Prunella Scales
Malachi Stack..Patrick McAlinney
Mrs. Levi.....Ruth Gordon
Barnaby Tucker...Robert Morse
Mrs. Molloy.....Eileen Herlie
Minnie Fay..Rosamund Greenwood
A Cabman.....Peter Bayliss
Rudolf.....William Lanteau
August.....John Milligan
Miss Flora Van Huysen.....
Esme Church
Her Cook.....Christine Thomas

New York Herald Tribune

December 6, 1955

THEATER

'The Matchmaker'

By WALTER F. KERR

"WE'RE terribly innocent!" cries a breathless young apprentice, popping his head out from under a restaurant tablecloth, as a lanky friend of his falls clattering out of a near-by clothes closet and Ruth Gordon gives her skirts a thorough shaking out to make sure there's nobody hiding there.

"The Matchmaker," which came sailing into the Royale Monday night like a Christmas card three weeks early, is a wonderfully innocent play. It has amused Thornton Wilder to remember—with rhapsodic fondness—the antic paper-doll farces that once sent the audience of an earlier and less troubled generation into gales of helpless laughter.

Though he has nominally based his spectacular spree on a particular German comedy by Johann Nestroy, he has actually been busy taking a veritable inventory of the comic spirit, itemizing all the dives into cupboards, all the absurd uprushings of love, and even all the picture-postcard settings that have ever done duty in the cause of merriment.

Having got them all together, he has invented a little toy theater in which to show them off. Because Mr. Wilder has a kind of parental tenderness for all such foolishness, and because he has a positive genius for getting hold of the essential joy of anything he touches, the gales of laughter come roaring back.

Every one has caught the hang of things. Before the curtain is really up, designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch has already crayoned, in the most festive colors, a rambling little travel poster carrying us from Yonkers to New York in the 1880s' Thereafter, in wing-and-drop style, she has drawn enchanting gas chandeliers, antiquated pipe-organs, and no fewer than five curtained bird-cages—all clustered happily inside a rustic rose-trellised frame.

Director Tyrone Guthrie has leaped into the fray with the enthusiasm of a child tearing open birthday presents. Mr. Guthrie knows exactly how to scoot two people out of one entrance while two others are sliding, at the same pace, in another. In fact, he knows how to double and quadruple Mr. Wilder's tongue-in-cheek inventions. At one time or another you are apt to find two middle-aged ladies kicking their heels high in the air simply because they are passing one another, while assorted low-comedy characters tumble gleefully off benches in the general windstorm. I suspect that visions of waiters caught in folding screens and Neapolitan accordion-players slipping wildly around corners are going to haunt you for quite a time after your visit.

Ruth Gordon, as a lady who is supposed to be helping a rich merchant find a wife but who is actually eliminating the competition, rustles onto the stage like a red-wigged tornado. Miss Gordon was pushing her first scene a little harder than was necessary last evening; twenty minutes later, though, she was blissfully in command of the hoots, growls, grimaces and umbrella-thrashings that drive the nonsense along.

And, like the others in an extraordinarily polished company, she is able to turn the romp into affecting sentiment before the evening is done. This new, and rather surprising note, is first touched upon by two enormously gifted players: Eileen Herlie, as a milliner who wants to get married because she is looking forward to the fights, and Arthur Hill, as a chief clerk in the merchant's shop who wants to mix the virtues of the poor, with the meals of the rich.

As these two stumble upon one another in the unpredictable merry-go-round Mr. Wilder has devised, there is a sudden, unaccountable glow in the air. Out of nowhere a gentle strain of emotion materializes, and as these good folk simply stare at each other, or join a few friends in a quiet rendition of "Tenting Tonight," a mere joke becomes an oddly touching memory-piece.

The other performances are dandy, too: Loring Smith's strutting merchant, Prunella Scales' flustered ingenue, Robert Morse's baffled juvenile, Peter Bayliss' red-nosed coachman, Patrick McAlinney's philosophical low-comedy Irishman.

As Ruth Gordon is turning the tide from knockabout farce to pleasant reminiscence, she says of a faded oak-leaf that has fallen out of an album that "It didn't have color and it didn't have life." Mr. Wilder has deliberately fashioned a comedy out of an old oak-leaf. But he has given it the color it had the day it sprouted, and he has—by some curious alchemy—given it exhilarating life besides.

New York Post

December 6, 1955

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Comic Triumph of Ruth Gordon

In 1938, there was a comedy by Thornton Wilder called "The Merchant of Yonkers" produced here, and it didn't seem very funny. Last night at the Royale Theater, a revised version of the play was offered under the title of "The Matchmaker," and it did. The notable improvement is in some part due to Mr. Wilder's success in the rewriting. But, with all proper praise to him, the agreeable result is chiefly to the credit of Tyrone Guthrie, who has staged it with a nice sense of slapstick, and, above all, of Ruth Gordon, who is brilliantly and superbly comic in the title role.

We are accustomed to skillfully humorous performances in this vicinity, but it is not often that we encounter one possessing the dash, relish and sheer uproarious gusto that Miss Gordon brings to the role of a wise but seemingly scatterbrained widow bent on acquiring a second husband. It is, in truth, an outrageous portrayal in what appears to be its wild, headlong abandon, but, for all its helter-skelter exuberance, it is so amazingly deft in its style and so artfully controlled by an unfailing comic intelligence that it emerges as a masterpiece of laughter.

The Slapstick

"The Matchmaker," despite the new brightness that Mr. Wilder has added to it, needs this comic brilliance, too, just as it requires the expert farcical staging that Mr. Guthrie has given it. For its rather sketchy tale of a wild day's adventures in the New York of the eighties has a way of running down from time to time and, upon occasions, it almost disappears altogether. It is at these dangerous points that Miss Gordon's performance or the director's wise use of slapstick comes rushing to the rescue, and things become properly entertaining again.

The danger in Mr. Wilder as a deviser of farces is that his humor sometimes tends to sound a little like a schoolteacher frolicking with his pupils to show them that he's one of the boys. Fortunately, it is at these moments that Miss Gordon plunges breathlessly through a speech or an actor hides under a table or sneezes in a closet, and the spirit of Olsen and Johnson, but infinitely better, is triumphant. "The Matchmaker" is frankly mechanical and proudly artificial, and its style is so well-maintained that such honest qualities become virtues.

The Philosophers

Not all of the comedy's best moments are slapstick, though. Mr. Wilder has written a series of little monologues, in which actors step to the center of the stage to address the audience directly, and all of them are excellent. There is one in particular, in which an alcoholic servitor tells of the advantages of concentrating on only a single vice at a time, and I suspect it may be as wise as it is funny. There is, at the end, a hint at a philosophical point to the play, but happily no one bothers much about this, including Mr. Wilder.

There is an excellent supporting cast. Loring Smith plays the tightfisted Yonkers merchant in his best explosive style. Eileen Herlie, a prominent London actress, is admirable as a romantic dealer in ladies' hats, and Arthur Hill is particularly good as an innocent apprentice loose in Manhattan. In lesser parts, Patrick McAlinney as the alcoholic philosopher, Peter Bayliss as a coachman, Robert Morse as a second apprentice, and Philip Leeds as a wordless musician are of vast help. Tanya Moiseiwitsch's sets and costumes are in just the proper mood. But, mainly, this is Miss Gordon's triumph.

Daily Mirror

December 6, 1955

Robert Coleman's ***THEATRE:***

'The Matchmaker' A Hilarious Comedy

● Ruth Gordon at her best in Thornton Wilder's farce at the Royale.

A band of inspired zanies, headed by Ruth Gordon, swept into the Royale Theatre on gales of laughter Monday evening, and proceeded to wreck the ribs of the first-nighters. They're in a cockeyed comedy, called "The Matchmaker," from the atelier of Thornton Wilder.

You may remember it as "The Merchant of Yonkers," a flop of a few seasons ago. A year or so back, Wilder re-did the script. Miss Gordon and a cast of British players turned it into a London hit, which just goes to prove what wonderful actors and direction can do for a playwright.

ON THE SURFACE, "The Matchmaker" seems to be just a crazy farce, but underneath it makes a lot of sense. And it's howlingly hilarious, this fable of nice folk trying to pack some excitement into fairly humdrum lives. The plot doesn't matter a bit, but it all adds up to a riotously rowdy romp.

Miss Gordon is at her all-time best as the gabby widow who protends to find a wife for a wealthy Yonkers merchant, knowing all the time that she's going to land him for herself. She brings perpetual motion to her yatting, mugs outrageously, falls off chairs and does just about everything else you've ever seen on the stage.

But she does it in her own inimitable style, with fascinating skill. It is obvious that she's having a high old time of it, while being devastatingly funny. We can think of no one else who could have carried off as tricky an assignment half so effectively. This is a Gordon role if there ever was one.

Eileen Herlie is captivating as another widow, who runs a millinery shop and can relish adventure when it comes her way. She has finesse and warmth. Loring Smith, an outstanding farceur, is intensely amusing as the tight-fisted old curmudgeon who proves to have a heart of gold when the chips are down.

ARTHUR HILL, Patrick McAlinney, Robert Moses, Rosamund Greenwood, Peter Bayliss and Esme Church contribute some of the wackiest characterizations to test the town's funny-bone in many a semester. And salutes should go to Alexander Davion, Philip Leeds, Charity Grace, Prunella Scales, William Lanteau, John Mulligan and Christine Thomas in other roles.

Tyrone Guthrie, forgetting the classics for the nonce, has staged "The Matchmaker" at a break-neck pace, with the result that roar follows roar with jet-plane speed. It demands tremendous vitality from the players and plenty of stamina on the part of the audience. And Tanya Moiseiwitsch has designed settings and costumes to encompass the festive cyclone.

The Theatre Guild and David Merrick have a top ticket in "The Matchmaker." It can tenant the Royale for as long as its irresistible interpreters remain sound of wind and limb. This magical reincarnation of an oldie should enrich the coffers of the Theatre Guild and David Merrick, its fortunate proprietors.

If you expect to share the slap-happy shenanigans in West 45th St., you'd better run, not walk, to the box-office. Otherwise you're going to have to wait too long to enjoy this side-splitting madhouse of merriment.

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

December 6, 1955

'Matchmaker' a Glorious Farce Played by 17 Perfect Comedians

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Even without sound, "The Matchmaker" would be the funniest thing on Broadway, for it is a long, lunatic ballet which has had no peer since the early Marx Brothers movies. With sound—words written by Thornton Wilder and spoken, growled, squealed and roared by a wonderful company headed by Ruth Gordon, Eileen Herlie and Loring Smith—it is ten times funnier.

This perfect entertainment opened last evening at the Royale Theatre, and if the stony-hearted stage manager hadn't finally ordered the curtain held down and the house lights turned up, the audience might be there this morning, cheering. I'd rather be there than where I am at this moment of turning in a report, for cheering on a typewriter offers difficulties. The machine goes clackety-clack when I want it to go "Yeeow!"

"The Matchmaker" is Wilder's reworked version of an old play of his called "The Merchant of Yonkers," which failed to arouse much mirth when it was produced here a good many years ago. For more than a year Miss Gordon has been having a success in it in England. So far as I am concerned, she can settle down on 45th St. and play the fool thing until she becomes an old lady.

My memory of "The Merchant of Yonkers" is not clear, so I can't be an expert and tell what magic Wilder wrought to turn it into "The Matchmaker"—but I can be absolutely certain that the new play would not be as enchanting as it is without the direction of Tyrone Guthrie. Guthrie has keyed up a remarkable company of comedians to the perfect pitch for split-second farce, and has yet allowed them—and the audience—to savor the lines of Wilder, which are so